

Although Esera had an older, gay brother named Tua, the two weren't especially close. Indeed, their mutual sexual orientation was more of a wedge than a common bond. Tua died of AIDS in 1992 at age 29, and his younger brother still deeply regrets that they didn't communicate more.

However, the most poignant aspects of "Alone in the Trenches" are Tuaolo's loneliness and overwhelming fear of discovery while playing in the NFL. "My success tormented me," he admits. "The better I did, the more exposure I received. The more exposure, the greater the chance of someone discovering my secret. ...The stress nearly killed me." Although he rarely encountered direct homophobia, the atmosphere of machismo, testosterone and presumed heterosexuality was debilitating. "[E]very day, I walked into the fear. The fear that if I slipped up, said the wrong thing, looked at another naked player too long, got an erection in the shower, I'd get outed — and then they would hurt me." Tuaolo reluctantly dated women to maintain the illusion of heterosexuality, but often drowned his sorrows with shots of tequila. More than once, he considered suicide. Then in 1997, he met Mitchell Wherley.

The two men hit it off immediately, but a long-distance relationship, combined with Tuaolo's many issues (some stemming from childhood sexual abuse), made things extremely difficult at times. Eventually, Tuaolo retired from football (his stint with the Carolina Panthers would be his last), partly due to injuries suffered over the years, but mainly

because the strain of keeping his relationship a secret was tearing it apart. Tuaolo doesn't pretend that he and Mitchell are the perfect couple, but his love for his husband and their two adopted children (Michele and Mitchell, Jr.) comes across quite clearly.

Tuaolo and Rosengren's writing style is simple and straightforward without being simplistic; it's geared toward readers of all levels. Sports fans will enjoy the sort of insider knowledge that can only be gleaned from nine years on the gridiron, while gay readers will identify with his conflict at having to hide his true self. There's very little swearing, and most sex takes place offstage. Nor does he go into detail about the adoption procedures of their two children; they simply pop into the proceedings as if by magic. Also, he doesn't hide his devout Christian faith, and frequently takes right-wing Christians to task for their intolerance and the hatred they spread in the name of the Lord.

With disarming candor and a good deal of hopeful optimism for the future, Esera Tuaolo has scored big-time with a winningly well-done autobiography. He may not have won a Super Bowl, but he has nonetheless achieved victory in living a happy, openly gay life.

**Info:**

"Alone in the Trenches: My Life as a Gay Man in the NFL"  
by Esera Tuaolo with John Rosengren  
Sourcebooks, Inc.  
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